

Keynote address urges Green Champion winners to raise awareness

By Pamela Kidron

Calling global climate change one of the greatest challenges of this generation, NIEHS Senior Advisor for Public Health John Balbus, M.D., highlighted the important role of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and NIEHS in meeting that challenge, during a keynote speech June 20 at the [2013 HHS Green Champion Award ceremony](http://nems.nih.gov/greening/Pages/GreenChampionsAwardsCeremony2013.aspx) (<http://nems.nih.gov/greening/Pages/GreenChampionsAwardsCeremony2013.aspx>) on the NIH campus in Bethesda, Md.

The Green Champion Award recognizes U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) employees for efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, energy and water consumption, and pollution.

"Today our Green Champions are truly champions, because they are helping us take on this great challenge of our lifetime — the related challenges of sustainability and climate change resilience," said Balbus. "Innovations in reducing energy and water consumption, like those we honor today, do not merely produce environmental benefits and lower costs. These sustainability measures are all public health interventions."

Balbus urged the assembled honorees and colleagues to help the general public better understand how climate change affects the nation's health.

Addressing climate change

NIH and NIEHS have had a longstanding leadership role in addressing health implications of climate change, Balbus said. NIEHS scientists, for example, have helped lead efforts to coordinate and expand NIH support for research on human health effects from climate change. NIEHS is currently heading a pilot grant program on health implications of climate change, including issues such as waterborne diarrheal diseases and heat-related deaths.

"I encourage us all to continue to be creative and look for transformative innovation wherever we can," said Balbus.

Helping the public understand

Balbus said that many still do not understand how climate change is tied to the nation's health. He called on colleagues to help the general public understand such connections as those between extreme weather changes and longer pollen seasons, and increase in deaths due to malnutrition caused by drought.

As an example of the effects of climate change at an individual level, Balbus told the audience about his elderly great uncle, who had lived in a Paris apartment without air conditioning until he died in 2003 during the most extreme heat wave to hit France in 500 years. A Jewish physician, his great uncle had managed to survive World War II, hiding from the Nazis in a farmhouse attic, only to die some 60 years later in a heat wave related to climate change.

"He was fortunate to survive his own generation's greatest challenge, which was the threat of Nazi Germany. But he wasn't fortunate enough to survive ours, which is global climate change."

(Pamela Kidron is a contract writer with the NIEHS office in Bethesda, Md.)



Balbus is an advocate for addressing the public health impact of climate change. (Photo courtesy of Ernie Branson)

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